DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 406 CS 214 553

AUTHOR Harshbarger, Scott
TITLE A National Schizophrenia: Orality and Literacy in Blair's Rhetoric.
PUB DATE Jul 94
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition (13th, University Park, PA, July 13-16, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Context; *Literacy; Oral English; *Oral Language; *Persuasive Discourse; Theories
IDENTIFIERS Blair (Hugh); Historical Background; *Orality

ABSTRACT

Although questions concerning the effects of literacy on society, culture, and the mind remain problematic for anthropology and psychology, considerations of the role played by orality, literacy, or other media in creating different communicative potentials between writer and reader, should not seem out of place in the discipline of rhetoric. Hugh Blair's 18th century treatise "Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres," which is typical of its period, offers an instructive means of studying orality/literacy theory in relation to the history of rhetorical inquiry. Although Blair maintains that both speaking and writing are "balanced on both sides" in terms of benefits, in the final analysis, his oral bias shines through: "The voice of the living Speaker, makes an impression on the mind, much stronger than can be made by the perusal of any Writing." Blair's oral bias has a great deal to do with his rhetorical concerns. Attempting to discover and describe the principles which make for powerfully persuasive discourse, he is inevitably drawn to a type of language that has the greater resources of expression. Hence, he is generous in his appraisal of ancient poetry, since it is based on a semi-literate culture. There are other significant reasons for his bias as well. As a Scot, Blair was forced to live a dichotomous existence. Becoming literate in Scotland meant learning to read and write in another language. According to David Buchan, "English became primarily visual and cerebral, and Scots became primarily aural and emotional." (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 375 406

Scott Harshbarger
English Dept.
Hofstra Univ.
Hempstead NY 11550

A National Schizophrenia: Orality and Literacy in Blair's Rhetoric

It's no secret that much of the ground breaking examination of the effects of the written word on Western culture was accompanied by extravagant claims of great psychological and cultural "divides" that separated the oral from the literate. The advent of literacy in the West was credited with everything from philosophy, to science, to civilization itself. Even though a great deal of the subsequent theory was refined, the orality/literacy hypothesis was still often regarded (often unfairly) as oversimplified or just dead wrong. Still, media studies--and literacy studies in particular--have flourished. While not abandoning the orality/literacy distinction, theorists now emphasize that the relationship between the two media can be characterized as much by reciprocity--mutual interaction, reinforcement, and transformation--as contrariety. It is one of the purposes of this paper to consider orality/literacy theory in relation to the history of rhetorical inquiry, in particular the work of Hugh Blair. Although questions concerning the effects of literacy on society, culture, and the mind remain problematic for anthropology and psychology, considerations of the role played by orality, literacy, or other media in creating different communicative potentials between writer and reader, speaker and audience, should not seem out of place in the discipline of rhetoric.

But having suggested the possibility of a sober, complex, rhetoric-based version of orality/literacy theory, I would not want to dismiss its history of excess as an aberration. The enthusiasm which its pioneers have exhibited on behalf of orality, and which often makes their work so rhetorically compelling, is itself evidence of the pull which orality--real or imagined--can have on the modern mind and emotions. Marshall McLuhan credited his sensitivity to changing media partly to the fact that he spent his early childhood on the Canadian prairies, a place which, according to his biographer, he "felt . . . provided him with a kind of natural

CS214553

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
S. Harshbarger
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

('5)

'counterenvironment' to the great center of civilization." Another provincial who showed a special sensitivity to the oral-literate distinction was Hugh Blair, an eighteenth-century Scot, whose work, while originating on the outskirts of the British empire, would become the dominant rhetoric of the late eighteenth-and early nineteenth centuries. Blair's work displays many of the earmarks, including the excesses, typical of orality/literacy theory. While immediately motivated by the rhetorical demands of his profession, his sensitivity to the differences between oral and written media can be attributed to his particular cultural situation which, like McLuhan's, gave him a "counterenvironment" from which to appreciate the rhetorical stresses and strains at work in the larger culture.

The necessity of regularly preaching to a congregation would, in itself, be enough to account for the oral sensitivity of Blair's rhetoric. Written by an ordained minister more famous in some circles for his sermons than his rhetoric treatise, Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* are deeply colored by his attempt to discover a rhetoric which will have the profoundest possible affect on the largest number of people. "One of the first qualities of preaching," he writes, "is to be popular; not in the sense of accommodation to the humours and prejudices of the people (which tends only to make a Preacher contemptible), but, in the true sense of the word, calculated to make impression on the people; to strike and to seize their hearts" (105-106). To accomplish this aim, the preacher must cultivate a particularly powerful and intimate manner of address: "the affecting, penetrating, interesting manner, flowing from a strong sensibility of heart in the Preacher to the importance of those truths which he delivers, and an earnest desire that they may make full impression on the hearts of his Hearers" (107).

Blair's attitudes toward the spoken and written word are influenced by factors other than his duties as a practicing oral rhetorician. Fairly early in the *Lectures*, he presents a chapter on the "Rise and Progress of Language," followed by one on "Rise and Progress of Language and of Writing." Like other eighteenth-century theorists, Blair assumes that was is essential about any phenomenon that develops over time is more readily apparent at its origins: "carry your thoughts

back to the first dawn of Language among men," he bids his reader (99), and this journey to the fountainhead quite naturally leads us to the oral origins of language: "Interjections, uttered in a strong and passionate manner, were, beyond doubt, the first elements or beginnings of Speech" (102). Language at its source is given an additional oral emphasis in Blair's account insofar as the representational aspect of words grow out of imitations of natural sounds. Moreover, because the number of words thus invented were necessarily limited, "rude, uncultivated men. . . would naturally labour to make themselves understood, by varying their tones of voice, and accompanying their tones with the most significant gesticulations they could make" (107). Although the connection between words and what they signify eventually becomes arbitrary, "Language, the nearer we remount to its rise among men, will be found to partake more of a natural expression" (106), expression which, for Blair, is emphatically oral in nature.

None of these ideas originates with Blair. They are typical of eighteenth-century theories of the development of language and society in general. Why Blair should include them in his lectures on rhetoric, however, is clear when he states that "Wherever strong exclamations, tones, and gestures, enter much into conversation, the imagination is always more exercised; a greater effort of fancy and passion is excited. Consequently, the fancy, kept awake, and rendered more sprightly by this mode of utterance, operates upon style, and enlivens it more" (113). Because such eighteenth-century rhetoricians as Blair or Campbell believed that the most powerful forms of persuasion not only had to convey ideas clearly (perspicuity) but had to do so with energy and force (vivacity), they were especially interested in a form of communication which, because of the circumstances of its development, was particularly suited to making deep and lasting impressions.

The significance of Blair's rhetorical understanding of orality becomes apparent when he moves into his discussion of the rise and progress of writing. "Next to Speech," he declares, "Writing is, beyond doubt, the most useful art of which men are possessed" (125). Blair contrasts different writing types--signs for things vs. signs for words--then recounts the progression of signification from words, to syllables, to individual sounds, and, finally, speculates that the basic

alphabet was invented in Egypt and carried by Moses into Canaan, where, adopted by the Phoenecians, it was transmitted to Greece. Blair then directly compares spoken and written language, finding "several advantages and disadvantages to be balanced on both sides" (135). The advantages of writing are three-fold: it enables us to "speak to the most distant regions of the earth;" it" prolongs this voice to the most distant ages;" finally, it allows the reader to "arrest the sense of the writer. They can pause, and revolve, and compare, at their leisure, one passage with another; whereas, the voice is fugitive and passing; you must catch the words the moment they are uttered, or you lose them for ever" (135). Although Blair's first two points make writing out to be basically an extension of voice, the third describes a process which several modern orality/literacy theorists have characterized as a difference with the greatest cognitive implications.

But despite his avowal that the advantages between speaking and writing are "balanced on both sides," in the final analysis, Blair's oral bias shines through: "although these be so great advantages of written Language, that Speech, without Writing, would have been very inadequate for the instruction of mankind; yet we must not forget to observe, that spoken Language has a great superiority over written Language, in point of energy and force. The voice of the living Speaker, makes an impression on the mind, much stronger than can be made by the perusal of any Writing. The tones of voice, the looks and gestures, which accompany discourse, and which no Writing can convey, render discourse, when it is well managed, infinitely more clear, and more expressive, than the most accurate Writing. For tones, looks, and gestures, are natural interpreters of the sentiments of the mind. They remove ambiguities; they enforce impressions; they operate on us by means of sympathy, which is one of the most powerful instruments of persuasion. Our sympathy is always awakened more, by hearing the Speaker, than by reading his work in our closet. Hence, though Writing may answer the purposes of mere instruction, yet all the great and high efforts of eloquence must be made, by means of spoken, not of written, Language" (136).

Blair's oral bias, as I have suggested, has a great deal to do with his rhetorical concerns: attempting to discover and describe the principles which make for powerfully persuasive

discourse, he is inevitably drawn to a type of language which, though limited in extension in time and space, seems to have greater resources of expression: tone, gesture, as well as the myseriously evocative qualities of sound. For this reason he is drawn not only to the various "primitivist" theories of lángauge current in eighteenth-century theory, but to the various ancient literatures, which, though written, seem to contain within them some of the raw rhetorical power derived from the semi-literate conditions in which they were produced. Thus, although Blair is often portrayed, and, indeed, portrays himself as providing a guide to the polite circles of literature culture, his oral-rhetorical bias often leads him in the direction of literatures which had come in the eighteenth-century to be considered primitive: Homer, Old Testament poetry, and, what is probably the most infamous instance, the Poetry of Ossian.

First, however, we should recognize that even Blair's account and appraisal of the Classical tradition is influenced by his search for oral-rhetorical power: a logical extension of the eighteenth-century injunction to "follow nature." "Eloquence is no invention of the schools," he writes, "Nature teaches every man to be eloquent, when he is much in earnest. Place him in some critical situation; let him have some great interest at stake, and you will see him lay hold of the most effectual means of persuasion. The Art of Oratory proposes nothing more than to follow out that track which Nature has first pointed out to men" (II 4-5). For Blair, much of the rhetorical tradition is flawed for failing to do just this; his recounting of the history of rhetoric thus involves an extolling of the practitioners of rhetoric and a criticism of those aspects of the traditions--the catalogues of topics, tropes, and other mechanical devices--which seem to be a product of the literate, manual tradition. Of the sophists in general, he remarks that "they were the first who treated of common places, and the artificial invention of arguments and topics for every subject" (16). For similar reasons, Aristotle's rhetoric is preferred over Isocrates's, and, among speakers, Demosthenes is superior to Cicero, who, though more polished, lacks the natural power of his predecessor.

Blair finds the real source of rhetorical achievement not in manuals but in the kind of critical

political situation which pertained in ancient Athens. "For there," he writes, "public speaking was not a mere competition for empty applause, but a serious contention for that public leading, which was the great object both of the men of ambition , and the men of virtue" (12). Under such conditions, passions are fully engaged, and, because the passions, for Blair, are part of human nature, they help to produce natural eloquence. "Almost every man, in passion, is eloquent. Then, he is at no loss for words and arguments. He transmits to others, by a sort of contagious sympathy, the warm sentiments which he feel; his looks and gestures are all persuasive; and Nature here shows herself infinitely more powerful than all art" (7). That this belief is as much classical as it is preromantic can be verified by the fact that Blair concludes the paragraph with a quote from a Cicero, and that the words themselves are translated almost verbatim from Quintilian.

With such passionate eloquence as his ideal, it's no wonder that Blair finds the rhetorical practice of his own country wanting. Even though a great deal of the lectures is taken up with matters relating to perspecuity, precision, correctness, purity, etc., Blair's primary worry seems to be that modern British eloquence lacks passionate power. He attributes this poor performance to several causes: the "correct turn of thinking" typical of enlightened moderns; the "phlegm" and natural coldness of the British; the complexity of modern law; and,with regard to preaching, "the practice of reading Sermons, instead of repeating them from memory" (43). Although "This may have introduced accuracy," writes Blair, " it has done great prejudice to Eloquence, for a discourse read is far inferior to an Oration spoken. It leads to a different sort of composition, as well as of delivery; and can never have an equal effect upon any audience" (44).

If part of the problem may be attributed to writing, the cure, for Blair, is characteristically oral: "the greatest and most material instruction which can be given for this purpose is, to form the tones of Public Speaking upon the tones of sensible and animated conversation" (218). "What is the reason for our being often so frigid and unpersuasive in Public Discourse, but our departing from the natural tone of Speaking, and delivering ourself in an affected artificial manner?" (II 218). Wilbur Samuel Howell finds a contradiction in Blair's positing of Demosthenes as a rhetorical

ideal, in that he warns modern speakers of adopting willy-nilly the fiery manner of the ancient Greeks. But Although Blair regards outright imitation of the ancient orators as inappropriate because of changed historical circumstances, the sympathetic responsiveness to a living audience remains, at bottom, an oral ideal common to both.

Another cure for rhetorical frigidity for Blair is the immersion in the fiery passions and warms imaginings of early oral poetry. If passion is the source of the most natural expression, then ancient poetry is the most natural expression of all: "It is a great error to imagine," Blair writes, "that Poetry and Music are Arts which belong only to polished nations. They have their foundation in the nature of man, and belong to all nations, and to all ages" (313). Basing much of his observations on accounts of the Indian Tribes of North America, Blair declares that "music and song are, at all their meetings, carried on with incredible degree of enthusiasm; that the Chiefs of the Tribe are those who signalize themselves most on such occasions; that it is in Songs they celebrate their religious rites; that, by these they lament their public and private calamities, the death of friends, or the loss of warriors; express their joy on their victories; celebrate the great actions of their nation, and their héroes, excite each other to perform brave exploits in war, or to suffer death and torments with unshaken constancy" (315).

While such speculation has often been dismissed as primitivistic fantasy, other scholars have seen in such observations the early stirrings of anthropology. Indeed Blair does not see the expressiveness of early poetry as an end in itself but in terms of its social function, arising from a particular historical circumstance: first of all, only such heightened forms of communication could be capable of drawing the necessary crowd to conduct public business. But, adds Blair, "There is a farther reason why such Compositions only could be transmitted to posterity, because before Writing was invented, Songs only could last, and be remembered. The ear gave assistance to the memory, by the help of Numbers; fathers repeated and sung them to their children' and by this oral tradition of national Ballads, was conveyed all the historical knowledge, and all the instruction, of the first ages" (317).

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

To support this contention, Blair refers to "The earliest accounts which History gives us concerning nations," when Priests, Philosophers, and Statesmen all delivered their instructions in Poetry. Blair instances the ancient Bards of Greece "the first tamers of mankind, the first founders of law and civilization" and the first historians, as well as the ancient poets of "The Celtic Tribes" (317). Such cross-cultural observations enable Blair to locate passionate expression not in any particular region or race, but, instead, in a particular stage of human history: "That strong hyperbolical manner which we have been long accustomed to call the Oriental manner of poetry (because some of the earliest poetical productions came to us from the East), is in truth no more Oriental than Occidental; it is characteristical of an age rather than of a country; and belong, in some measure, to all nations at that period which first gives rise to Music and Song. Mankind never resemble each other, so much as they do in the beginnings of society" (318).

With such a backdrop of such cultural and rhetorical unity, it is not surprising that the impact of writing should appear in the *Lectures* as something of a fall: "The art of Writing was in process of time invented; records of past transactions began to be kept; men, occupied with the subjects of policy and useful arts, wished now to be instructed and informed, as well as moved. They reasoned and reflected upon the affairs of life; and were interested by what was real, not fabulous, in past transactions. The Historian, therefore, now laid aside the buskins of Poetry; he wrote in Prose, and attempted to give a faithful and judicious relation of former events. The Philosopher addressed himself chiefly to the understanding. The Orator studied to persuade by reasoning, and retained more or less of the ancient passionate, and glowing Style, according as it was conducive to his purpose. Poetry became now a separate art, calculated chiefly to please, and confined generally to such subjects as related to the imagination and passions. Even its earliest companion, Music, was in a great measure divided from it" (322). Blair compares the early Bard, who, inspired "by events which interested his country or his friends . . . , arose and sung," to the modern authors, who "studied for reputation and gain," and "Composed cooly in their closets" (322-23).

As I've already indicated, there is very little that is completely original in Blair's work. Perhaps Blair's primary contribution is to gather up and bring into focus the rhetorical usefulness of the wide range of eighteenth-century speculation on man, nature, and language. Indeed, Blair's interpretation of ancient poetry in terms of its oral function is due primarily to Thomas Blackwell, who attributed Homer's poetic power partly to the fact that, "Letter's then were little known." But an early prototype of the orality/literacy hypothesis is only one thing that Blair and Blackwell have in common. The two, together with many of the other eighteenth-century theorists from whom Blair rhetorically adapted theories of language and human nature were Scottish, and I'd like to close by offering a partial explanation as to why so much--indeed almost all--of the eighteenth-century rhetorical speculation which was to dominate Anglo-American culture well into the nineteenth century occurred in eighteenth-century Scotland.

There are, of course, many reasons: Scottish Universities were not as hamstrung by tradition as Oxford and Cambridge; the establishment of Union had sent most of the politicians to London, thus giving Scottish intellectual life a more clerical and academic cast, and, what is probably the most popular explanation, the provincial status of Scottish intellectuals provided them with the personal and professional incentive for devising means of gaining power through the gentlemanly art of discourse. The fact that such rhetorical means should be dominated by theories of oral poetry, rhetoric, and language, I would suggest, can also be attributed to the Scottish intellectuals' particular cultural situation. In his study of the Scottish Ballad, David Buchan point to

> a general dichotomy so pronounced in eighteenth-century Scotland as to be dubbed a "national schizophrenia". By the eighteenth century, Scots who wanted to get on in the world had to learn "to speak properly", as the revealing phrase has it, that is, to speak English. Literate Scots became accustomed to carrying two languages in their heads: English for writing, Scots for speaking, English for "proper" occasions, Scots for "real" life. The upshot was a peculiarly Scottish dissociation

> of sensibility whereby, as Edwin Muir put it, Scotsmen felt in Scots and thought in English.
>
> In eighteenth-century Scotland the effects of literacy are intrinsically bound up with the effects of the anglicization of Scottish life; literacy meant not just learning to read and write but learning to read and write *in another language*. For Scotsmen, the fragmentation of consciousness that attends the arrival of literacy became polarized in the two languages: English became primarily visual and cerebral, and Scots became primarily aural and emotional. (Buchan 69)

I'd like to use Buchan's argument to suggest that, far from helping to relegate the *Lectures of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* to the ash-heap of rhetorical history, Blair's Scottish oral bias made his rhetoric more in tune with the oral/literate complexity of the anglo-american culture in which it found such a ready home. The schizophrenic culture which produced it was, to a large measure, Anglo-American culture writ large. That is, the cultural situation of Scotland, in which "writing" assumed an authority often at odds with ways of living, feeling, and thinking associated with oral communication, threw into relief tendencies which were rapidly overtaking a culture which was becoming predominantly oriented toward the letter: culture in which increasing literacy rates, together with a virtual explosion of literate learning, coexisted, combined and helped produce a craving for moving oral rhetoric. Blair's lectures spoke to this oral/literate complexity in ways which may have as much to do with a Scottish nostalgic longing for the emotional familiarity of the spoken word as they do with early anthropology, psychology, or modern rhetorical theory. But, to paraphrase one of Marshal McLuhan's favorite poets and primary sources, perhaps the road of emotional excess can lead to the palace of critical wisdom.

Works Cited

Blackwell, Thomas. *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1736). Rpt. New York: George Olms Verlag, 1976.

Blair, Hugh. *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783). Ed. Harold F. Harding. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1965.

Buchan, David. *The Ballad and the Folk*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972.

Marchand, Philip. *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*. New York: 1989.